U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Armenia

Advancing Freedom and Democracy Reports - 2008
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Part 1

Armenia is a constitutional republic with a popularly elected president and a unicameral legislature (National Assembly). The February 2008 presidential elections were significantly flawed. Problems included favorable treatment of the government's candidate, instances of ballot stuffing, vote-buying, multiple voting, voter intimidation, violence against opposition commission members and proxies, and suspiciously high turnout figures. On March 1, 2008, the government imposed a state of emergency and used force to disperse large crowds of protesters, restricting media freedoms and the right of assembly and arresting scores of protesters. The clashes between protesters and security services resulted in the deaths of at least 10 people. The state of emergency was lifted March 20, 2008, but restrictions on civil liberties remain in force due to a strict new law on public gatherings, pressure on opposition media, and continuing arrests and intimidation of government opponents. The government's human rights record remained poor. Citizens were not able to freely change their government; authorities beat pretrial detainees; the National Security Service and the national police force acted with impunity; authorities engaged in arbitrary arrest and detention; courts remained subject to political pressure from the executive branch; prison conditions were cramped and unhealthy, although slowly improving; and authorities imposed restrictions on citizens' privacy, freedom of press, and freedom of assembly. Journalists continued to practice self–censorship, and the government and laws restricted religious freedom. Violence against women remained a problem, as well as trafficking in persons, discrimination against persons with disabilities, and societal harassment of homosexuals. There were reports of forced labor.

Part 2

The U.S. democracy and human rights strategy focuses on promoting democratic institutions and processes, political pluralism, independent media, independent judiciary, the rule of law, a vibrant civil society, respect for human rights, freedom of religion, and institutional capacity of government agencies and NGOs to combat trafficking in persons. In support of the parliamentary and presidential elections in 2007 and 2008, respectively, the United States has sought to improve electoral systems, procedures, and infrastructure, as well as to involve civil society in electoral processes, via a broad portfolio of assistance programs. The country's Millennium Challenge Compact (MCC) that entered into force in September 2006 is conditioned on meeting standards in the "Ruling Justly" indicators, thus heightening the importance of promoting democratic and human rights reforms to underpin the broader bilateral relationship.

Part 3

U.S. officials exert constant diplomatic pressure to promote democracy and human rights-related goals with government officials, political parties, civil society, and media representatives at all levels. U.S. officials also regularly convey these messages through local media channels. U.S. officials have also repeatedly warned the government that MCC funding is contingent upon its progress in democratic practices and in meeting the MCC indicators. The United States continues to implement its three-year democracy promotion strategy, which focuses on enhancing the integrity of the country's electoral processes, including producing accurate voter lists, providing public information and voter education, developing a democratic political culture, building public opinion polling capacity, strengthening fair electoral adjudication, enhancing election monitoring capabilities, strengthening political parties, and increasing independent media coverage of elections. U.S.-sponsored public service announcements prior to the parliamentary elections informed voters and officials of the penalties for voter fraud contained in the new electoral code. The voter registry was updated, officials were provided extensive election administration training, local election observers were fielded in every polling station in the country, and an election hotline was established to provide legal advice to voters. U.S. assistance implemented through local NGOs also promoted public awareness and education on voters' rights and responsibilities and resulted in NGOs' active monitoring of the election campaign. Additionally, the United States is working to reduce election fraud through training programs, including seminars and a U.S. study tour for prosecutors and members of the Central Election Commission. The United States provides technical support to the central government in legislative reform pertaining to decentralization and improving the transparency and democratic processes of local governments.

To support the development of an independent media, the United States continues to fund a program to develop professional and sustainable media outlets, decrease the media's heavy dependence on sponsorship from political and private interests, and encourage outlets to adjust programming to respond to public concerns. Program efforts have supported training and technical assistance to help media outlets qualify for and repay loans provided by the United States. The United States funded a survey to raise awareness of the law on freedom of information among government officials, journalists, lawyers, judges, NGOs, members of parliament, and party members. Additionally, funds were provided to enable journalists to receive training locally, as well as in the United States through the International Visitor Leadership Program. U.S.-supported training themes include advanced journalism studies, reducing ethnic bias, the media and elections, and relations between the press and the government. The United States further supports freedom of information via Internet Connectivity Centers it helped to establish, as well as via four American Corners that provide information about U.S. democratic institutions.

U.S. efforts in support of an independent judiciary include technical assistance to increase understanding of the case law supporting the European Convention on Human Rights, including seminars and the translation and dissemination of information on related decisions. U.S. efforts have also been crucial in the drafting of a new Judicial Code of Ethics and the establishment of an annual bar exam that admits new attorneys into the profession in a transparent and objective manner. As a result, defense lawyers have become more professionally sound in counter-balancing judges and prosecutors during trial. The United States continues to conduct training programs for judges, prosecutors, attorneys, and police with the aim of bringing law enforcement and judicial practices into line with international standards. The U.S. government has distributed numerous translated copies of a text on the U.S. legal system to the highest ranking members of the government and conducted trial training programs for prosecutors that introduced them to American legal practices. The U.S. government also worked to improve criminal procedure laws in accordance with international standards by bringing experts to the United States to review draft legislation with local authorities.

Part 4

To promote the rule of law and fight corruption, the United States advocates for improved anticorruption legislation that limits judicial discretion in sentencing and increases penalties for perjury, bribery, and related crimes. A U.S.-supported legislative proposal was adopted by the parliament in December 2007 and provides for transparency in court proceedings by allowing the dissenting opinions of judges to be included as part of the judicial record. The United States also provides funding to civil society groups to investigate and raise awareness of corruption in schools and the court system. In 2007 the United States initiated a program to reduce corruption that helps to equip citizens to combat corrupt practices that they encounter and to change social attitudes and behavior among youth and adults to help them become attuned to the consequences of corruption and more likely to oppose or confront it. In addition, the program strengthens anticorruption institutions, including the government's Human Rights Defender (ombudsman), and encourages institutional changes to prevent or reduce corruption.

U.S. officials are promoting vibrant civil society by encouraging the government, independent, and opposition political parties, and civil society organizations to engage in constructive dialogue on governance issues. Television debates took place with U.S. funding before the parliamentary elections in May 2007. In December 2007, in anticipation of the February 2008 presidential election, the U.S government funded programs on presidential candidates and electoral issues that were aired in local regions through a network of independent local broadcasting companies. A weekly television program before the presidential election focused on ethical issues for

journalists to consider in election coverage. With U.S. funding, local NGOs continue to pursue initiatives to promote human rights, democratic development, fair and transparent electoral processes, and civil society. Through a strong, consolidated effort, U.S. and NGO advocacy played a role in keeping Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty on the air. U.S.-supported NGOs are also making inroads in supporting mental health care, building capacity to plan and execute advocacy campaigns, lobbying on major environmental cases, and strengthening dialogue between local authorities and communities to address local issues. Youth groups in more than 70 communities throughout the country were mobilized during 2007 through U.S. support, and additional U.S. grants are improving the technical skills of other NGOs.

To promote respect for human rights, U.S. officials in the country maintain close, collaborative relations with local human rights defenders and representatives of human rights NGOs. U.S. grants have funded public awareness campaigns and training workshops on domestic violence. Additionally, U.S. funding has enabled students to be trained on human rights in 35 schools across the country and to help them prepare project proposals in their local communities. U.S. officials frequently discuss religious freedom problems with government and religious leaders as part of the overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. government maintains close contact with the head of the Armenian Apostolic Church, leaders of other religious and ecumenical groups in the country, and regional representatives of foreign-based religious groups, such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Baha'is, raising their concerns with the government. Additionally, combating human trafficking in the country remains a priority, and U.S. diplomacy on this front continues. U.S. officials meet regularly with high-level members of the government and members of the international antitrafficking working group to promote their work against trafficking. U.S. officials also monitor local trials of suspected traffickers and propose legislative initiatives to combat this problem, such as increasing related criminal sanctions. U.S. officials also propose recommendations on antitrafficking funding objectives to the government, and U.S. antitrafficking assistance provides annual funding to a shelter that offers a safe haven, medical, social, and legal services for victims of trafficking. U.S. assistance has also provided training for the Border Guards Service, the National Security Service, and the police on antitrafficking.

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